



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

Learning Foreign Languages in Primary School: Research Insights Series

Citation for published version:

O'Neill, R 2018, 'Learning Foreign Languages in Primary School: Research Insights Series: Book review: María del Pila García Mayo (Ed.), Multilingual Matters, London (2017), xxiii + 276 pp. ISBN: 9781783 098095, GB £34.95', *System*, pp. 1-5. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2018.11.002>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1016/j.system.2018.11.002](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2018.11.002)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

System

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



Book Review

Learning Foreign Languages in Primary School: Research Insights, María del Pila García Mayo (Ed.). Series: Second Language Acquisition 115, Multilingual Matters, London (2017), xxiii + 276 pp.
ISBN: 9781783 098095, GB £34.95

reviewer, University of Edinburgh

I came upon this book at the start of planning an undergraduate initial teacher education degree for fluent British Sign Language (BSL) users, deaf and hearing, to teach BSL in primary schools as a modern language and in immersion settings. We don't yet have research on how primary age children learn minority languages like BSL, but this book inspired me with its theoretical and methodological range, giving plenty of ideas for teaching and assessment approaches, further studies and possibilities for student investigations into language learning.

For applied linguists, teachers and students who want to explore recent research findings on learning foreign languages in the primary school, the book will fill an important gap. Seven of the twelve chapters are studies conducted in Spain with Spanish or Catalan speaking children learning English; the remainder have research carried out in England, China, Iran and Hungary. The focus on Spain is a positive in this volume as the country has used CLIL as an approach for teaching children English for many years; four of the Spanish contributions explore aspects of CLIL.

I have already made use of one outstanding chapter in this book, Butler, Liu and Kim's chapter 8 on narrative development in L1 and FL. This is a longitudinal study among young Chinese learners of English. Carefully and clearly expounded, it shows cross-linguistic viewpoints on what makes a coherent and cohesive spoken narrative for primary aged children. The analysis of the L1 and L2 stories is beautifully clear, showing changes in mean frequencies of features such as causal relations and explanation of mental states over three school years. This chapter gave me many ideas about how teachers could use deaf children's signed narratives, analysing them to chart progress with cohesion in storytelling, looking at story grammar and particular cohesive devices. This particular chapter gave me a strong theoretical foundation for improving teachers' assessment skills in L1/L2 storytelling development.

Investigations of children's views about language learning make up two other important chapters in this book. Muñoz in Chapter 3 discusses the development of language awareness at the transition from primary to secondary school. Children in primary schools in Spain experience a marked change in teaching approach as they move to secondary school away from games to a focus on form. The researcher uses interview data with pupils at the top of primary and again in early secondary school as they discuss learning English in their L1, Spanish or Catalan. The children show considerable awareness of what they like in English classes and what helps them learn the L2. Their ability to understand and discuss rule-based differences between languages grows by the second year. The author shows that regularly listening to children's views about language learning can make language teaching more efficient.

Iranian children's understanding of intercultural issues is the focus of in Chapter 11 by Pinter and Zandian. Recognising that this is a challenging task for primary aged children in Iran as they have very little contact with other cultures, the researchers produced a questionnaire which allowed open-ended responses to imaginary new friends from other cultures or moving to a new land. The chapter illustrates nicely how to use an open-ended questionnaire interpreting results quantitatively, including using marginal notes or spoken and written comments produced by the children.

The four contributions about CLIL from Spain are a slightly uneven group within the book (chapters 4 – 7); their methodological differences could be a positive feature if they were used as a way of encouraging graduate students to critique study designs. Llinares (chapter 4) provides a strong theoretical foundation explaining the application of SFL to CLIL settings. The analysis of pupil talk in science and citizenship lessons by counting features per thousand words gives a way of comparing functions in each lesson type. The researcher suggests as a result of the findings that the SFL approach can alert teachers to the occurrence of logical relations development in pupil talk, and that choice of task type can support pupils in practising ideational functions.

Conversational interactions in pairs of 11-year old children who have been learning English in CLIL settings for eight years are investigated by Ibarrola and Hidalgo in Chapter 5. The analysis looks at conversational strategies in an information gap task. Repetition and use of L1 were the most common negotiation strategies.

The influence of both age and gender is explored in Chapter 6, where Azkarri and Agirre focus on negotiation of meaning strategies in L2 conversation to explore whether gender or age improves success with information gap tasks. Using pairs of pupils in third and fourth grade, organised in mixed or matched pairs of female and male pupils, possibly more conclusions are drawn than warranted by the sample size. The CLIL setting is almost incidental to this study.

CLIL is at the centre of chapter 7 by Pladevall-Ballester and Vraciu. It investigates the use of L1 and interactional strategies in comparable CLIL and EFL settings. The task is a pupil spoken narrative from picture story repeated over four data collection points from the ages of 9 - 12. The chapter raises important theoretical issues about young pupils using all their languages as one resource. The study shows a decline in L1 use from both groups over time, while interactional strategies increased in the CLIL group, including the use of private talk.

Two studies with a positivist design open the book. Zhao and Murphy in Chapter 1 use a psycholinguistic approach to look at word retrieval speed in primary school children from China. The children chosen had above average English vocabulary levels. Reaction time was measured from image till the child said the English word, then from Chinese word with picture to an English word. Both L2 vocabulary size and Chinese word frequency predicted shorter latency times. The discussion section is stimulating and critically evaluates different possible theoretical models of bilingual word retrieval.

An unusual study about Esperanto is conducted by Tellier and Rohr-Brackin in chapter 2. Tackling the issue of whether an early start with an FL is better, the literature review shows that an early start is only more effective in naturalistic settings and an hour or two a week of learning a FL does not help young children; they can do this more efficiently when they are older. Metalinguistic awareness, however, can develop at a young age and aids FL learning. The study investigates this in relation to an Esperanto empirical study, posited as a way of 'kickstarting' metalinguistic awareness. An impressive feature of this study is the quality of the sample teaching materials used across language groups. Results showed that the gains made later in French did not reflect which particular language was studied first; rather, a language aptitude measure was the best predictor.

A mainly qualitative methodology is adopted in the three remaining chapters in the book. Significant work by Hernández, de Larios and Coyle (Chapter 10) looks at how teacher written reformulation may provide important feedback for primary aged L1 Spanish pupils writing in English. The study takes a cognitive interactionist approach to 'language related problem space', that is an episode initiated by a pair of pupils talking in the L1 and noticing a feature of the L2, for example agreement between them about a written string of text. The data is the discussion of how they redraft and write stories together. Unfortunately, we don't see an example of a reformulated text but the discussions are analysed clearly using functional moves. More advanced learners benefited most from this approach. The strategies used in the pupil pair talk are well illustrated. Despite some concerns about the analysis method, this study had a convincing design which showed unexpected results: the children who just had the teacher reformulated texts had more opportunities for 'upgrading' talk, whereas the group which also had teacher instruction about the reformulated text did not.

A study by Blasco of three Spanish children learning English over three years adopts a simple but effective qualitative approach in Chapter 9. The spoken conversation was analysed at four time points in terms of syntactic complexity and accuracy as the pupils reached the end of primary school. There was a trade-off between syntactic complexity and accuracy over time.

The study of an assessment and evaluation questionnaire makes up the final chapter of the book (Chapter 12, Nikolov). This is part of a much larger project which aimed to evaluate 300 assessment tasks for English learners in Hungary. Pupils evaluated the tasks in questionnaires in Hungarian, and teachers also gave their views. The researcher was disappointed in the teachers' lack of confidence in implementing the new range of assessment tasks, recognising that teaching young pupils a FL is demanding and requires confident and creative teachers.

To conclude, this book is proving very useful for my thinking and practice, and I hope will inspire other teachers and researchers to use or adapt study designs or analysis approaches to their own projects. Each chapter is organised very similarly, allowing readers to easily compare the studies. From this book spring many ideas for future directions in research with young children learning modern, foreign and community languages.